# De-centering Men as the Measure

## *Or, What Were Women Doing During the Continental Congress?*

Women's history as a field has come of age in the last 25 years. Initially viewed as compensatory history, those of us who began the field looked for "great women" to add to the great men we all know about. This early vision could be summed up as "add a woman and stir" history. It always defined women in men's terms and judged them by their comparative importance to men and men's history. Relatively soon, we began to ask fundamental questions about where women were, what they were doing, why they were doing it, and what their work allowed others to do. We also began to understand that women are both powerless and powerful, that women are both acted upon and actors. Once we began to get at the social fabric of women's lives, we began to "de-center" men as the measure of all that is normative. And that put us on the path to understanding the history of all people. Gerda Lerner said it succinctly in *The Creation of Patriarchy:*

> As long as men believe their experiences, their viewpoint, and their ideas represent all of human experience and all of human thought, they are not only unable to define correctly in the abstract, but they are unable to define reality accurately.*

Once we "de-center" men as the measure and look through either a different lens or the double lens of both men and women, we begin to conceive what might approach a truly human history. This process almost always has at least two stages. First, we must uncover what women were actually doing; and then we must synthesize it into the "traditional" history we know. Only then can we approach a true picture of the human past, one in which both women and men are the measure. In an attempt to "define reality accurately," I would like to describe my fantasy interpretation of the Continental Congress at Philadelphia's Independence National Historical Park.

I have twice been there and have heard the National Park Service's stirring narrative of the Continental Congress, which wrote the documents we hold so important to the founding of this Republic and our whole political life. The period is fundamental to our country, but the interpretation of the Continental Congress never even mentions a woman. After all, only men were delegates; and the soldiers in the War for Independence were predominantly male. The history of the founding of the United States is told as a male story.

However, as a women's historian, I heard the interpretation, toted up the time involved, and started de-centering the story. I immediately asked myself: What was happening to all those men's wives and children? Where were they? What were they doing? How did they manage?

No one at the time knew whether our Declaration of Independence would succeed. People supported the Revolution on faith and with pure hope in a completely unknown future. We have some contemporary examples to push us in our contemplation. For instance, Winnie Mandela showed determined perseverance and steadfast work while her husband was jailed for 20 years. But we still can only begin to grasp the level of unknowns in 1774, when the men of the Continental Congress left their homes for Philadelphia.

Think about the women "behind" the men at Philadelphia and what they were doing. I decided to examine the life of Abigail Quincy Smith Adams, wife of John Adams and mother of John Quincy Adams, to attempt to answer, for one couple, "What were the women doing, while the men were off in Philadelphia?"

Abigail Quincy Smith was born on November 11, 1744, an upper middle-class daughter of Puritans. She died in 1818 at the age of 74. Though her father was a graduate of Harvard College, class of 1725, she had very little formal education and, like all women of the time, was most certainly not allowed to attend college. She was, however, well-read. She taught herself French; and, as an adult, was an avid student of history.

The summer she was 14, Abigail became a member of her father's Congregational Church and met John Adams. By 1762, at 17, she and John were exchanging love letters. They were married on October 25, 1764, when John was 29 and Abigail was 19. Within the year, Abigail had their first daughter. Over the next nine years, she had

* Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 220.

four more children, one of whom would become the sixth president. By the age of 29, Abigail had given birth to five children, and John had a law practice and a business.

In 1774, with her youngest child less than two years old and her oldest just nine, Abigail's husband, John, set off from Boston to Philadelphia as a delegate to the First Continental Congress. John remained away for **10** years. He and Abigail were together only for brief intervals during that entire decade. In one fell swoop, Abigail took over their household, the children's educations, John's business, their farm, and the rearing of five children.

Let me be utterly clear: Abigail enabled John to follow his avocation and help realize their joint dream of declaring independence and forming a new nation. In a time when married women lacked many legal rights, Abigail made the money that allowed John to continue in politics. Without formal education herself, she educated their children. She bought the farm stock, bred the cattle, hired the help, dealt with farm tenants, and handled war refugees on their land. Independently, she bought important pieces of land as they became available, paid the bills, and greatly increased their holdings. After the war, when she joined John in Europe, New York, and Philadelphia, she continued to run the family farms, including the buying of stock and the repair and construction of new buildings. Frankly, she saved their family from the financial ruin which happened to many political men, and she supported John's dreams and avocation.

Throughout his absence, Abigail was an avid letter-writer, urging John to work for independence from Britain and writing in defense of democratic principles for all—men and women, white and black. Although known for her call to "remember the ladies," few know that she was also vehemently anti-slavery. She was, in fact, far more progressively democratic than John or most of his colleagues in the Continental Congress.

When we think about the sacrifices, the loneliness, the oppression, and the discrimination Abigail Adams endured and the acumen, the patriotism, the power, and the competence she displayed during this period when John (who might now even be called a "deadbeat Dad," or a ne'er do well, and certainly a dreamer) was working in politics without pay, hundreds of miles from his family and his responsibilities, it gives us a whole new understanding of the price of founding the Republic. It also gives us some clues about how the world looks when we ask different questions, when we "de-center" inquiry, when we simply ask, "Where are the women, and what were they doing?"

Abigail Adams suffered discrimination early and often, and she was vocal about it. She understood injustice, but she also had power which she wielded comfortably. She was victim and actor, weak and powerful. She was tied to her biology, she worked hard as a mother, and she reveled in her role as family matriarch. She was, by all accounts, a quite wonderful grandmother who took great pleasure in her grandchildren. She worked without pay in her family business and organized various community efforts. Her life reflects (though on a grand scale, perhaps) the lives of many women who daily juggle children, domestic work, household decisions, paid work, community affairs, and support of a spouse. For a contemporary instance, Hillary Clinton's law practice has allowed her husband to pursue his political career.

I would love to see Abigail's story told with the same admiration and care that John's is at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia. I yearn after the stories of all those wives, mothers, and sisters who supported the men who worked so diligently in Philadelphia; and I believe some day all of those stories will be told. When that happens, our picture of the founding of the Republic will be truer and clearer. We will come closer to, in Gerda Lerner's term, "defining reality accurately." When we ask new questions, "de-center" men as the measure, uncover what women were doing, and then synthesize it into the traditional understanding to arrive at a truly human history, we will give the public the great gift of knowing the past, which will help them understand the present, and take control of the future. We can hardly hope for more.

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